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SUBJECT: MUSLIM TELEVANGELIST IN POLYGAMY SCANDAL: FANS,
PROGRESSIVES DISMAYED

REF: 05 JAKARTA 4913 TELE-PREACHER AA GYM ON ISLAM IN
INDONESIA

Classified By: Political Officer Catherine E. Sweet, Reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Indonesia's most popular Muslim televangelist, Aa Gym, has admitted to taking a second wife, much to the dismay of Muslim progressives and his adoring female followers. Gym's admission, along with a recent sex scandal involving a politician who tried to take his pop star lover as a second wife, have brought the polygamy debate to the fore. President Yudhoyono has seized upon the public outcry over Aa Gym to revisit and expand Indonesia's polygamy laws. Advocates of polygamy, who are by largely male and religiously conservative but also include the leader of Indonesia's largest mass Muslim organization, are pushing back. They point out that the Qur'an permits polygamy and assert that the need for polygamy is essentially biological. Polygamy foes decry the use of plural marriages as cover for adulterous behavior, and question whether men can truly be "just" toward more than one wife, as required by law and by Islam. While heartened that the Gym affair might spur a revision of Indonesia's polygamy laws, one feminist worries it may also embolden religious conservatives to use the otherwise moderate Gym to buttress their opposition to women's equality. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Indonesia's most popular Muslim televangelist, Abdullah Gymnastiar (generally known as Aa Gym), has admitted to taking a second wife, much to the dismay of Muslim progressives and his adoring female followers. Speculation about the charismatic Gym entering into a polygamous arrangement came to a head on December 1, when he was asked during a Friday sermon broadcast from Malaysia whether he had married a second time. Gym offered a tortured explanation about men and women's differing physical needs, saying that "women tend to be monogamous, that's how their software is." As for men, "their software is different," claimed Gym. In a series of press conferences on December 2 and 3, Gym conceded that three months ago he had married Alfarini "Rini" Eridani, a woman who reportedly worked at Gym's Darut Tauhid Islamic boarding school (Rini is divorced according to some press accounts, widowed in others). Gym, a photogenic 44-year old cleric, has been married to first wife Ninih Muthmainnah Muhsin (known as Teh Ninih) for 18 years. She is the mother of his seven children.

Stand by Your Man

¶3. (U) Teh Ninih has previously offered public support for Gym taking another wife. In October, amid rumors that Gym had married again, Teh Ninih told reporters that "if (polygamy) can make Aa happy, I will just go along. Although that issue is very hard for a woman, I hope to get to heaven.

One of the requirements for entering heaven is being loyal to your husband." Indeed, Teh Ninih has appeared by Gym's side during his recent press conferences, revealing that preparations for the second marriage had been underway for five years. Still, when reporters asked if she was jealous, she conceded that she was "clearly jealous. That is a sign of love."

¶4. (U) Gym's action has devastated many of his fans, who regarded him as an ideal husband and father. The embodiment of "smiling Islam," Gym was particularly popular among women, who routinely packed stadiums to hear him preach and who were avid watchers of his weekly televised sermons (reftel). As a consequence of his announcement, however, the Jakarta Post reported that attendance at Gym's Sunday lectures dropped precipitously, and an SMS protest campaign has begun. Gym has acknowledged the impact of his decision and offered an apology to "whoever does not agree with my action. If indeed I am no longer considered to be appropriate, hopefully another person who is more appropriate will emerge."

¶5. (U) Aa Gym is the latest prominent figure to join the ranks of the Indonesian polygamist pantheon. Although there are no reliable data on the overall rate of polygamy, observers agree that it is increasing. Included among well-known polygamists are the deputy chairman of the upper house of parliament, A.M. Fatwa; Chairman of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party's Central Board, Anis Matta; and former President Megawati Soekarnoputri's Vice President, Hamza Haz, who has three wives. (Note. Megawati herself is the product of a polygamist relationship as the daughter of founding president Soekarno and his second wife. End Note.) Perhaps the most colorful polygamist is a Jakarta restaurateur named Puspo Wardoyo, who holds an annual

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Polygamy Award ceremony and whose restaurant franchises offer selections such as "polygamy juice" and "polygamy vegetables."

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, the issue of polygamy has also surfaced in a sex scandal involving Golkar legislator Yahia Zaini and pop music singer Maria Eva. After video of a sexual encounter between the two was made public last week, Zaini has stepped down from his post as, ironically, Golkar's head of religious affairs (Zaini is also a former chairman of the Muslim Students Association). The party is currently debating whether it will recall Zaini. At a press conference on December 4, Maria Eva acknowledged the affair and said that although Zaini, who is already married, asked her to marry him, she refused because she "did not want to become a second wife."

Time to Revise Polygamy Laws?

¶7. (U) President Yudhoyono has seized upon the public outcry over Aa Gym to revisit Indonesia's polygamy laws. Indonesia's 1974 marriage law stipulates that men wishing to take more than one wife (and women wishing to become second, third or fourth wives) must seek permission from the local court. Permission will be granted only if the first wife cannot carry out her wifely duties, becomes handicapped or terminally ill, or is barren. Additionally, the husband must obtain the first wife's/wives' consent (if she is mentally capable of granting it), prove that he can afford to support all of the wives and their children, and guarantee that he will be just toward all his wives and children.

¶8. (U) In 1983, at the urging of then-President Suharto's wife Ibu Tien, the government passed a law further restricting polygamy for civil servants. In addition to fulfilling the requirements of the 1983 law, civil servants must also obtain their supervising officer's permission to take another wife (if male) or become a second/third/fourth wife (if female). Civil servants who are married to other civil servants are forbidden outright from engaging in

polygamy. "Officers," however, are exempted from the 1983 law; these include ministers, the attorney general, the leadership of non-departmental governmental institutions, supreme/high state secretariat institutions, state- and regionally-owned banks and bodies, military personnel, governors and district heads. A final revision of the law in 1990 prohibits female civil servants (but not male civil servants or officers of either sex) from entering into plural marriages.

¶9. (U) On December 4, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) met with Minister of Women's Empowerment Meutia Farida Hatta Swasono and Nazaruddin Umar, the Ministry of Religion's Director General of Religious Guidance and, according to Meutia, ordered that the government look into broadening the 1983 law to include all state employees. SBY, who indicated that his goal was to protect women, argued that those who justify polygamy as religiously sanctioned must "understand the religion properly," and abide by the prerequisites to taking more than one wife. He indicated that he opposes the use of religion as a wedge on this issue, calling on Indonesians to "think clearly" and prevent the issue from "developing into an unhealthy public discourse."

The Case for More than One Wife

¶10. (U) Not surprisingly, the Aa Gym case has revived an emotional debate about the acceptability of polygamy. The most vocal advocates of polygamy have been, by and large, male and religiously conservative. They have pointed out that, under certain circumstances, the Qur'an permits men to have as many as four wives, and note that the Prophet Muhammad himself was a polygamist. Like Gym, others have explained the need for polygamy as essentially biological. For example, Masdar Farid Mas'udi, a high-ranking member of Indonesia's largest mass Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), asserted that "polygamous institutions actually fulfill women's desires and reproductive rights. Not every man is up to being a good husband, unlike women." The Jakarta Post also quoted Yoyoh Yusroh, a female member of parliament from the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, as saying that "polygamy is better than infidelity. Think of a 25-year old widow) she will need a husband to finance her children. If polygamy is banned, things would only get worse for her."

¶11. (U) NU Chairman Hasyim Muzadi, whom many believe to be much more conservative than NU's general membership, has criticized the government's plans to change the marriage

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laws. Muhammadiyah Chairman Din Syamsuddin has likewise suggested that the government should stay out of what is fundamentally a religious question; he also admonished religious leaders not to become involved in a political debate over the marriage law.

The Argument against Polygamy

¶12. (C) Prominent Muslim feminist and Director of the Center for Pesantren and Democracy Studies Lily Munir, who has long been outspoken in opposing polygamy, told us she was dismayed by Gym's announcement. (Note. Munir is a former International Visitor and a fellow at Emory University's Islam and Human Rights Fellowship Program. End Note.) She condemned those Muslims who use polygamy as "a sexual excuse" for behavior that would otherwise be considered adulterous, saying that there is no textual basis in the Qur'an for that.

¶13. (U) Nazaruddin Umar, the Ministry of Religion's Director General for Islamic Affairs, questioned whether men could truly treat more than one wife equally, as mandated by Islam. "Can one really(be just? Men would say yes, but God in the holy Qur'an says it is impossible for men to be just." (Note.

Umar is a former Fulbright scholar who conducted research at Georgetown University on gender biases from 2002-2003. In addition to his ministry position, Umar teaches at the State Islamic University. End Note.)

¶14. (C) Munir believes that the Gym affair will have a mixed effect. On the one hand, she applauded the government for taking advantage of it to revisit Indonesia's polygamy laws. On the other hand, she fears that Gym's action will embolden religious conservatives who do not support equal rights for women and who may now use the otherwise moderate Gym to buttress their arguments.

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